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Khasi ADS

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Previous Notes on the Khasi Hills. Monuments at Cherra 800
Hill Tribes. By Major H. H. Godwin-Austen, F.R.G.S., F.G.S., &c., Deputy Superintendent Topographical Survey of India. [With Plates i. and ii.]

Having again visited the Khasi Hills since writing my last [illegible]
paper, I am enabled to give some further details regarding their [illegible]

rude stone monuments. At the village of Yangdak, near Shillong, are to be seen some very striking monoliths; and although they do not come up quite to the height of those at Nartiang (noticed by Dr. Hooker in his "Himalayan Journals"), yet they are very worthy of being mentioned. They stand on the open spur just above the village, and have been carried out of the beds of the Shillong sandstone series, and some of the smaller blocks have been taken from the conglomerate beds, the lowest in the series and which come in, in the bed of the ravine, to the south of the spur. There are a number of monuments on this site, large and small, arranged both in line and on two sides of a square; the two largest have their central monoliths—height, 7 ft. 7 in.; width, 1 ft. 9 in.; thickness, 9 in.; and height, 6 ft. 6 in.; width, 2 ft. 7 in.; thickness, 1 ft., respectively.

This is, which is taken from a photograph by Mr. William Robert, Assistant Surveyor in the Khasi Hills survey party, gives an excellent idea of the second largest structure, showing the very massive fabric-stone, the "Kiad Kyrkat," in front. This structure consisted of thirteen upright stones, which could not all be brought into the field of the camera; but the six outside stones on the right are shown. Many of the slabs in the prehistoric monuments have been overthrown and broken quite recently, perhaps by Nepal-ese coolies from the military station close by. At one time a mountain battery of European Artillery was quartered there, and I attribute the overthrow of so many of the stones in the neighbourhood to their handiwork, who would look on such monuments as a "great lark." The Nepal (native of India) is not of a superstitious disposition; the European and half-European (no-educated) is decidedly so. Thus the monument with the highest stone is imperfect, and it must, when perfect, have been a very handsome one. This is a sad pity, after the time and labour that must have been expended in its erection.

I did not observe any new slabs anywhere in the immediate neighbourhood of the monuments; it seems a peculiarly lucky locality, and old lines of fortification are to be traced on many sides, especially on the approach from the direction of the Falls of the Umiam. These old lines of defence are on a curious system: a ditch and bank have been carried forward from the main defences from 200 to 300 yards down the ridge of the spurs, thus effectually preventing an enemy working round the hill sides below the villages.

This fortified site points to a state of things in these hills when the relations between the large village communities or

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slaves were very much as we find them at the present day among the Nagas and Kukis, beyond and bordering our present extreme limits, viz. that of constant feud. They are now the poorest, most peaceful, and contented of all the hill people on the eastern frontier.

In my former paper I did not allude to the caves in these hills, which I am inclined to think are works of greater age than the stone structures. The custom is one that certainly has long since been given up, for I could not obtain any satisfactory account of them. They are only to be seen on the northern side of the Khasi plateau, and Dr. Hooker, in his account of his trips to the Kolhoi Rock, did not fail to notice them. About Nurung and towards Jowpotong they are very numerous, and always stand on commanding situations. On the path leading down the grassy spur to the stone monuments previously described, near Jowpotong, is a very fine large example of a cave, about eight feet high. They are usually plain hemispherical mounds of earth; but this one is faced all round on the base with slabs of stone about four feet high; they are frequently not higher than six feet. A distant view is shown in Plate iii.

Nowhere in these are traces of the earth that forms them having been excavated close by; it must, therefore, have been carried in some distant direction, to avoid unsightly hollows near the structure. I should much like to have dug into one of these caves, but was afraid to hurt the feelings of the people by doing so. They are very probably sepulchres of an earlier form to those now made of stone, and this point it might be interesting to clear up.

Beyond the Khasi area no caves are to be found, at least I had never come across any until visiting North Manipur last winter (1873–74), where, at the head of the Imphal river, on the direct road from Sumjoorung, are four fine caves, all faced with large boulders. They are old, and the Nagas now living in the village near said they had been made by another clan of Nagas, who long ago had gone further north, and the site of [illegible] might be supposed to [illegible] ...

... refers to the different forms of the sinwary in the Khasi Hills; but he has not quite exhausted the subject, or got further than I did, although with regard to the disposal of the skins of the dead he gives some further interesting particulars.

As I think that drawings are of very great interest, and better exhibit the many different forms of bone depositary or sinwary that have been adopted at different periods by tribes inhabiting localities very far apart, and often quite unconnected ethnically,

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I give a sketch of a form of cemetery meriting attention, and not hitherto noticed (Plate iii.). Several of this form may be seen on a low spur near the Dome of Jaddo at Shillong. The cemetery is above ground, and stands on a slightly raised platform. It consists of four thick stones, about three feet high, set on edge, and capped with a heavy top-stone; and, so far, it resembles the usual form, a figure of which is given in my first paper.* The approach to all these depositories is from the eastward by several low steps, and the whole structure is enclosed on three sides by large flat slabs (in the rough) standing on end—the largest being placed round the cemetery itself, overtopping it by three to four feet, and the remainder, three diminishing in size, stand on either side of the steps. There are about six such monuments along the ridge of the spur, and I have seen no others similar elsewhere. They have been broken into, and the front stone removed, very probably by some followers from our regimental lines, which is close by. There is thus a double probability of their ultimate destruction altogether, should the notice be extended in that direction.

Explanation of Plates II. and III.

Plate II.—View of megalithic monuments at Nongthei, near Shillong, Khasi Hills. From a photograph taken by Mr. W. Eckett.

Plate III.—View of rude stone cemetery and approach, at Shillong, Khasi Hills, with ruins in the distance: by the author.

Discussion.

The President said that the paper of Lieut. de Crespigny on the Mikirs of Assam, contained a great deal of extremely interesting information, especially in relation to their religious customs. The author hoped, although he seemed to connect the Mikirs with the inhabitants of Thibet, through the similarity of their religious beliefs. He (the President) did not venture to express any opinion on this point, but believing any episode [illegible] like the present, however rude, to be a ground rich in evidence of identity of race, derived from the comparison of the religious of savages, must be received with caution, especially in the absence of any information as to physical resemblance. The attention that is devoted to religion arises from the interest that is taken in the subject, rather than from the value of the evidence it affords of connection with other peoples. There must always be a great liability to error in the principle of the religious customs of savages. Inquiries into the resemblances of the arts of different people, about which there could be no mistake, were, he thought,

* Read May 1st, 1875.

DISCOVERY AT BOULDER, GOOD HILLS.

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of more scientific value; and the vocabularies given by the author in this paper would, no doubt, be found of great use to comparative philologists. It is hoped that the Institute would be favoured with some fuller information on the races of Borneo from Lieut. de Crespigny.

With regard to the paper by Major Godwin-Austen, he (the President) said his communications were always welcome to the Institute. He wished that a more detailed account had been given of the instrument referred to. There appears to have been a great camp-building period in the life of most races, when neighbouring tribes were constantly at war, and each had its stronghold in case of attack. Such camps are conspicuous amongst the antiquities of nearly all parts of the world, and a comparison of the different styles of defence adopted, when viewed by the knowledge of the art of ornamentation which we possess, affords reliable evidence of physical connections. In the early British camps of this country there never were any evidences of the use of flanking defence excepting the entrances; but the description given by Major Austen of this earthwork appeared to indicate that something of the kind was known to these people.

[For information on the stone monuments of the Khasi hill tribes see also categories 211 and 764, specifically in regard to sources 9: Godwin-Austen and 18: Godwin-Austen.]